

Cooking Know-How: Virtual and Personal Transmission of Skills. A Hungarian Example¹

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The blog² is one of the most versatile communication genres of the digital age.³ Because writing a blog requires only basic IT skills it is within the reach of many people who have access to a computer/smart phone and an Internet⁴ connection. (It follows, therefore, that the absence of these facilities excludes many people from digital communication.⁵) Many blogs are built around a clearly definable theme and one of the most popular topics is cooking and nutrition. There are now several hundred Hungarian-language gastro-blogs.⁶ This vast, constantly-changing mass of data is almost impossible for a researcher to examine and analyse systematically. For this paper, I have chosen a single blog⁷ and its author to present as an example. The case study shows the role that blogs play today in the changing food culture and in the life of a blogger. The blog I have chosen is very popular in Hungary. Its main topic being home bread baking (“Limara’s Bakery blog”) – as the symbol of traditional Hungarian cuisine in today’s food culture⁸ – and the reason why it came to my attention. I will begin with the genre forerunners of the gastro-blog, the way the blog functions, and the role it plays in the process of passing on cooking skills. In the second part, I will focus on the blogger with

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² While writing this paper, Klára Kuti’s article (Kuti 2014. pp. 51-68) on the same topic was published, but I have not yet had the opportunity to consider it in my work.

³ On the linguistic aspect of blogging, see: <http://e-nyelvmagazin.hu/2010/09/10/a-blogok-nyelvezeti-aspektusai/> (accessed: 29.5.2014) See further: <http://e-nyelvmagazin.hu/lapszam/?sz=blogok-es-bloggerek> (accessed: 2014. 05. 29.); Also Balázs / Bódi 2004, pp. 67-84.

⁴ See: <http://www.netkutatasok.hu/2013/09/ksh-szelessavu-internet-haztartasok-68.html> (accessed: 2014. 05.30)

⁵ For the Spread of the PC, laptop and Internet in Hungary from 2005 to 2013, see http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat_eves/i_oni006.html (accessed: 2.6. 2014).

⁶ See: <http://www.gasztriblogok.hu/> (accessed: 2014. 05.01.)

⁷ For the “Limara’s Bakery blog”, see: <http://www.limarapeksege.hu/> (accessed: 2013. 12.05.)

⁸ On bread consumption today in Hungary, see Báti 2012, pp. 253-261. On the renaissance of home bread-baking, see Báti 2013. pp. 118-127.

particular emphasis on her motivations for writing the blog, the steps she has taken, and the difficulties she encounters. In the third part I will show her “offline” transmission of skills in the traditional form of baking bread.

Literacy became general in Hungary in all social strata and among both sexes in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth century. At the same time women’s manuscript notebooks, containing mainly recipes began to appear in the villages (Keszeg 2008, pp. 356-358). Although they were not written for the public, these handwritten recipe books and diaries can be regarded as the traditional forerunners of today’s gastro-blogs. It is, therefore, worthwhile to briefly consider and to compare them. The handwritten notebooks usually have the name of the author and, in some instances also, the year of composition on the cover, giving them an individual character. Girls generally began to write these handwritten notebooks before marriage. The notebook reflected the author’s taste, her own selection of recipes copied from her mother’s collection, from colleagues, or from the press. Over time, the stock of recipes in such notebooks steadily increased. The progress of technology can also be followed in the handwritten notebooks, because, besides handwritten recipes, typewritten examples appear from the 1960s, although they did not entirely replace the handwritten ones. From the 1990s, the written and printed texts were photocopied for further transmission. Nowadays, growing use is made of the computer and the Internet in ever-wider social circles for the storage and distribution of recipes.⁹ The diary entries/posts/photos also give an individualistic image to blogs intended for a wider public. Like the notebooks, the stock of recipes in the gastro-blog reflects the blogger’s taste, but the readers also shape the site with their comments, questions and answers.

The handwritten booklets and their counterparts today – the digital documents – serve the same purpose, that is, to stand in for memory (so that their users do not have to keep so much data in mind) (Keszeg, 2008, p. 85). With their help the method of preparing a dish can be recalled, in unchanged form, at any time. The physical state of the handwritten notebooks indicates how frequently they were used – they fall open automatically at the most-often used recipes, they may also contain individual corrections, the pages may even be stained or torn,

⁹ On usage of the IT skills in Hungary see: <http://www.tarki.hu/adatbank-h/kutjel/pdf/a825.pdf>. (accessed: 2014. 05. 30.)

while other recipes, often in the majority, are never used. In the case of data stored on a computer, we can follow only the time of saving or of making changes to it, rather than data on their use, and this information is less helpful in judging the author's preferences.

The handwritten notebooks were used mainly to record recipes used on festive occasions. This is why they include a large number of recipes for cakes and meat dishes. The recipes for these have shown the greatest variation over the past fifty to sixty years in Hungary. The duplication of the recipes in the ways already mentioned also played a big role in their spread.

Considerable differences between the generations, relating to the process of learning to cook, can be observed in the use of the handwritten notebooks. In this short paper, however, I can only touch on this question briefly. Earlier, women did not use recipe books or notebooks to prepare everyday dishes. Up to the mid twentieth century, girls acquired this basic level of cooking skills, including bread baking, by watching their grandmothers and mothers cooking in the home. It was only after their marriage that young women acquired a higher level of skills, generally from their mothers-in-law. Today's oldest generation only needs to consult a written recipe for very few dishes. From the second half of the twentieth century, the two-earner family model became the norm in both towns and villages, as women continued their studies and entered employment. The effect of this on learning to cook was that the traditional methods of handing down information, based on oral information and imitation, were no longer effective within the family. People began to increasingly rely on the foods available in shops and to eat in canteens, with fewer people cooking at home during the week. Young women increasingly strive to learn how to prepare different dishes from their peers, or from the print and electronic media. Today's middle and young generations have large collections of recipes that they continuously add to, and not only for foods for special occasions. A recent development of relevance to our topic is that the digital recipe text is now favoured more often than the handwritten one. In appearance, the recipe stored in a computer looks very like a cookery book, as photographs can even be added, it can be printed at any time in any number of copies, and also shared via the Internet. At the same time, there has also been an increase in the demand for printed recipe books. Such books now represent a substantial share of Hungarian book publishing. Most households use several recipe books. Instead of the kitchen of the family house being the place for learning about new recipes, television

broadcasts now play a large role in cookery teaching, and are also a source of new recipes, together with the many gastro-blogs on the Internet.

One of the reasons for the interest shown in the gastro-blogs is that people try to solve the problem of compiling the weekly menu with the help of the Internet. They look in the gastro-blogs for answers to the important question: “What should I cook?” There is a substantial demand from the young generation for variety and novelty. Through food commercials and tourism people have come into contact with the cuisines of other countries, and with the help of the Internet it is easy to obtain recipes for the new dishes. At the same time, renewed interest in foods prepared at home in the traditional way is significant as a form of resistance to globalisation and food industry products containing additives. The interest now shown in home-made bread is one example. Because even the oldest generation no longer remembers the precise details of the bread-making process, the Internet has become an important source of information on the best ingredients and traditional recipes.

The blog I have chosen as an example of this has recipes for many different dishes, but its main interest is homemade bread and baking with yeast. I visited the blogger who lives in a small town in Southern Hungary, in her home, where I interviewed her and took photographs as she demonstrated how to make bread. As I am very fond of baking myself, we made bread together, and so I had the opportunity to see her work in practice.



Fig 1. The blogger shows the right methods and phases (Photo: Anikó, Báti, Makó, 2014.)



Fig. 2. Four loaves of hand-made bread. (Photo: Anikó, Báti, Makó, 2014.)

The author of the Limara's Bakery blog says that her passion for making bread began when she acquired a bread-baking machine. She was given one nine years ago and began collecting recipes for it from the internet. This enabled her to develop her basic skills and is the source of her ideas. She became a corresponding member of a blog devoted mainly to breads and offering a large number of recipes and much experience in bread making. She decided to begin her own blog in 2008. She created the name of her blog, "Limara", by jumbling the letters of her own name to express her individuality and uniqueness. When she began to write the blog her main motivation was to collect her own recipes into one place, to share her knowledge, and to build up a network independent of locality. The blog now has 20,000 registered followers, the Facebook page has 13,000, and many people with questions about baking write to her on her two electronic mailing lists. Her popularity basically grew from her blog-writing, but her recipes which were published in the print press, leading in recent years to interviews and TV programmes, have also greatly contributed to her success.

She never learnt bread making, she was not a baker by occupation, and she learnt every step herself by trial and error. This is why the explanations she gives for the process of cooking and baking are so useful and practical. The most important source of her knowledge is the Internet. She regularly reads Hungarian gastro-blogs, as well as international ones with the help of translation programmes, and she has a large number of cookery books. She looks for ideas on quantities and methods, and at times she even develops a new recipe from a food

photo. Her ideas now appear not only on her own blog but also in the print press. The popularity of the blog and its name give credibility to her recipes published elsewhere, thus making them her own intellectual creations. Through the blog, she has been approached with many requests that far exceed the dreams of most gastro-bloggers. For example, on the Hungarian national day, the Feast of the New Bread (20th August) she was invited to demonstrate her bread-baking skills in Budapest, together with professional bakers. She has received a number of offers – from Hungary and even from abroad – to become a partner in planned new bakeries! Thanks to the popularity of her blog, she found it easy to get help when she had a problem – when her gas-cooker broke down, she shared this bad news with readers of her Facebook page. Then a leading manufacturer of household appliances gave her a new electric one, their latest, top model, and all they asked in exchange was that she displays their logo on her site for a year. But there are also jealous and ill-intentioned people among the anonymous commentators – someone even accused the blogger of wanting to force women back into the home as housewives. Actually, the values represented by the blog are representative of women's role in the traditional family. However, many of the readers agree and identify with this, as they like to offer their family freshly-baked bread they have made themselves, which, in their opinion symbolises love and care. And this is not in conflict with the modern ideal of the woman.

The breads the blogger makes are unique compared to those available in shops and bakeries in that they do not contain additives, and almost every loaf is different in form. She did not learn to bake bread from her grandparents because they no longer made bread at home, but she began to learn to cook as a child from the age of eight because of her mother's illness. Her experience reaches back to childhood, as does her passion for cooking and baking. She bakes bread only for her family; it is not sold commercially. She speaks with great feeling about kneading the dough, and also about the freshly baked bread:

When I begin to knead, I feel the aroma of the dough and it fills me with calm. I knead with the same monotonous movements and I feel the bread coming to life you can feel that it has been touched by human hands and made with love. (*Nők Lapja* 2013. 33).

The recipes on the blog are detailed and precise (ingredients, preparation time, oven temperature, and so on, are given) so that readers are able to use them successfully. This is

one of the secrets of the site's success. When the blogger makes bread or another dish before writing the blog, she has to measure every step precisely. For this reason, cooking and baking intended for the blog does not resemble everyday practice because it requires deliberate, precise planning and execution. She writes her recipes with today's gas and electric cookers in mind, not for the old-style ovens, and she uses kitchen appliances, such as a kneading machine and also a microwave oven. A photo of the dish is an essential part of the blog. She, herself, takes the photos, mainly of the finished dish, with her own camera. She uses fewer phase photos showing the step-by-step course of making the dish. She says that it does not take her long to write the recipe for the blog, but that the diary-like stories using a personal tone that she posts together with the recipe, require much more time to achieve. These entries reveal many personal details of her everyday life and the values she authentically represents. Firstly, her cooking knowledge and skills contain everything that was part of living practice in every peasant household three generations ago. Secondly, she further expanded her knowledge with the help of the Internet, by collecting all the variants she could find, of bread and yeast-based goods, from different regions of Hungary and many countries of the world. However, among professional bakers, she is only regarded as an "amateur" and occasionally they make her aware of this, for example when they judge her work.

In contrast to the majority of blogs, besides the virtual connection, personal contact and the transmission of skills have become very important for the blogger and her readers. Through the blog she has found friends in neighbouring areas and they regularly come together to taste each other's dishes and cakes. For the past three years, she has also been organising bread-baking courses for her readers. Every month, guests come from all over the country to learn bread-making from her, personally. I too visited her on one such occasion, and I interviewed her and her guests while the bread was baking in one of the town's small restaurants where the course is held. The blog readers who come are mainly people who already have a certain level of baking expertise as they are able to bake with yeast on their own from recipes, but who would like to improve their skills. Bread baking is a difficult, complex process, and it is not possible to pass on all the elements perfectly on the blog, even with recipes, precise measurements, phase photos and videos. This level of know-how that can only be reached with a great deal of practice is difficult to achieve with those means. In the past, women learnt these skills in the family, from their grandmothers. Today, the blogger has become the model, revitalising traditional practice. The quality of the flour, the state of

the dough, the hand movements: in kneading and shaping the dough, and the time needed for the dough to rise, are all important steps in successful bread-baking. The blogger makes the bread together with her guests, she observes and corrects their movements and, in the meantime, for hours on end, she tirelessly and enthusiastically explains all the secrets of making bread at home, drawing on her own experience.

Writing the blog, inventing recipes, writing to the commentators, and accepting invitations, now take up all her time in what has become a practically full-time occupation. Fulfilling her own dreams and the requests of her readers, she had the opportunity to share the best of her knowledge by publishing her recipes in a printed book. Even with the vast amount of information offered on the Internet, there is still a demand for real, paper cookery books, as shown by other gastro-bloggers also. At the time of the interview, my blogger baked several kinds of bread every day for a week, and with the help of professional photographer and food stylist they were photographed for the planned book. The blog and the blogger's life is a special mixture of old and new, the virtual and the real. The cookery book and the bread-baking course represent older forms of transmitting know-how, as they are a kind of permanency in a constantly changing virtual world. But it was through regular, careful, reliable blog-writing that the blogger achieved self-fulfilment and reputation.

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